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Raising the Standards for Standards: A Call for Definitions

Patricia Freitag Ericsson

Since the mid-1980s, talk about quality education has been largely subsumed into one word—standards. Questions of quality are frequently couched, embedded, and often obscured by this one, powerful term. In the shorthand of those who seek to disparage public education, as well as those who praise it, the term “standards” has become indispensable. Teachers are exhorted to have “high standards” for student performance; states establish standards for teachers, for students, for graduation, for college admission; the federal government mandates testing and more testing so that “high standards” can be assured. The educational enterprise is awash in standards, but little attention is paid to what the term really means.

The idea of standards has been a part of the educational vocabulary since the beginning of public education, but standards moved to center-stage in the early 1980s with the *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report and continue to play a defining role in education policy today. This report characterized the US education system as “at risk,” as being “overtaken by competitors,” and as having a foundation that is “eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity” (“Introduction,” para. 1). The report emphasized the need for quality education largely on economic grounds and made it clear that higher educational *standards* were the answer to the high-risk status of US education.

As anyone in the educational enterprise can attest, emphasis on standards has not faded since this report. New standards projects are continually being created and older projects are constantly revised. Although the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has dominated the discussion about edu-

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cational excellence since its 2002 passage, the testing required by NCLB demands that states adopt standards that are then assessed in mandated examinations. And despite the belief that NCLB is based only on state standards, sections of NCLB require state participation in national testing based on nationally developed standards. For example, a number of fourth and eighth graders in each state must participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress reading assessment every other year (Wixon, Dutro, & Athan, 2004, pp. 80-82).

Without carefully crafted, widely accepted definitions of standards, standards projects are rife with problems and frequently fail. The absence of careful definitions typically leads to confusion, rejection of standards, and can actually work to undermine the education system. Recent support for this claim can be found in the 2003 publication of the *Standards for Success*, a project of the American Association of Universities and the Pew Charitable Trusts. The 80-page *Standards for Success (S4S)* report includes a three-page introduction in which the word "standard" or "standards" is used at least 25 times and never defined, a move that illustrates a belief that the term is so transparent that no definition is needed. The problems created by the lack of definitions in this project are detailed later in this piece.

Educators, parents, administrators, journalists, and legislators use the term standards so frequently and freely that differences in definitions of standards have become all but invisible. Everyone is in favor of standards (especially "high" ones), so why bother to stop and figure out if we're all talking about the same thing? The simple truth is that we *do* need to stop and consider meanings of standards because we're not all talking about the same thing! The damage that definitional confusion has caused takes many forms, but one result is particularly troublesome. As the standards movement has progressed, thinking about standards has narrowed, with performance standards (also known as assessment standards) taking the lion's share of the attention. Although performance standards are important for the movement, they are inappropriate without carefully developed content standards. And strictly enforced performance standards without equally stringent opportunity-to-learn (OTL) standards ensure that students in inadequately supported schools will continue to fall below acceptable performance levels, thus setting the stage for repeated failure and censure. A standards movement based solely on performance standards has led to an "assessment-driven" movement that focuses obsessively on testing (often standardized testing) as the only way to improve education.

In this essay, I argue for higher standards for standards. My argument calls for careful consideration of the many definitions and subdivisions of

standards. I argue that every conversation about standards should begin and end with definitions. And I argue that careful attention to definitions is a step toward reforming the standards movement from one that has handcuffed teachers and hobbled students, to a movement that can work to actually improve the quality of education for all stakeholders. My examples come from the broad field of English Language Arts for two main reasons. First, this field has been my home for 23 years—as a university professor, as the director of a composition program, and earlier in my career, as a high school English teacher. Second, and more important, my experiences have led me to believe that the field of English Language Arts has been one of the areas most severely impacted by a standards movement focused on performance standards. Wixon et al. (2004) make similar claims in their article about content standards development, asserting that English Language Arts has been “one of the most highly contested and publicly visible subject areas” (p. 70).

To provide a historical framework, I begin with the *Nation at Risk* report, move to definitions of the term “standards,” and then trace the use of the term through the establishment of national standards, focusing on the National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association (NCTE/IRA) Standards for the English Language Arts project which was plagued by problems with standards.¹ To provide more recent support for my argument, I consider the ongoing problems that the lack of attention to definitions cause in the 2003 *S4S* report. The development of state standards has been no less contentious or less beset by problems in standards definitions than national projects have been. Because of the number of state projects, however, this article does not attempt discussion of them. Excellent coverage of the issues encountered in state projects can be found in the aforementioned recent article about content standards authored by Wixon et al. (2004).

With this essay, I hope to revive the discussion and even the controversy over definitions that once characterized the standards movement. Because our field continues to be negatively impacted by the performance/assessment-driven/standardized testing regime, we are key to this revival, well-suited to initiate it, and have much to gain from a redefinition of standards.

I argue that careful attention to definitions is a step toward reforming the standards movement from one that has handcuffed teachers and hobbled students, to a movement that can work to actually improve the quality of education for all stakeholders.

The Nation at Risk: "A Rising Tide of Mediocrity"

In 1981, President Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Education, Tyrrell H. Bell, created the National Commission on Excellence in Education and charged it with researching and writing a report on the quality of education in the US. The document this group produced is widely known as the *Nation at Risk* report. When it was released in April 1983, it was front page news in almost every major newspaper in the US, large sections of it were reprinted in countless newspapers, and it was the lead story in the evening news of the three major TV networks (McIntush, 2000, p. 420).

According to many scholars, the *Nation at Risk* report was, and continues to be, one of the most influential documents in US education history. In 1994, Robert Orrill, now the Executive Director of National Council on Education and the Disciplines, claimed that the language used in this report was "unusually militant," recalling one of the most memorable and oft quoted statements from the report: "The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and as a people" (p. 3). In an article in *Rhetoric and Public Policy* in 2000, Holly McIntush claimed that the *Nation at Risk* report changed the basis of the argument on educational reform, setting "the agenda for educational policy" in new terms. Prior to this report, McIntush maintains, education had been cast as "a means of social and political equalization." After this report, the focus of educational discourse became "education as a means to economic prosperity" (p. 421).

In response to the "crisis" trumpeted by the *Nation at Risk* report (now defined as an economic crisis), educational researchers Tyack and Cuban (1995) report that, "the states promulgated more educational laws and regulations than they had generated in the previous twenty years" (p. 78). These authors go on to comment that the legislative answer to calls for educational excellence were aimed at "lazy students and incompetent teachers" (p. 78), and that the answers consistently called for *more*—particularly "more discriminating standards" and "more standardized testing" (p. 79). The 1983 report laid the foundation for reforms and began the persuasive efforts needed before such drastic changes could take place. The two-part persuasion involved convincing the public that US schools were "inefficient, anachronistic, and irrational" and that there were "sure-fire solutions" (p. 112). The first argument was based largely on numbers that told of falling test scores and failures to keep up with international competition. The second argument, the "sure-fire solutions," was based on establishing standards.

The "Excellence in Education" section of the *Nation at Risk* (1983) report promotes standards stating that, "We should expect schools to have

genuinely high standards rather than minimum ones, and parents to support and encourage their children to make the most of their talents and abilities” (para. 3). In the “Public’s Commitment” section, the report states,

... [M]ore than 75 percent of all those questioned believed every student planning to go to college should take 4 years of mathematics, English, history/U.S. government, and science, with more than 50 percent adding 2 years each of a foreign language and economics or business. The public even supports requiring much of this curriculum for students who do not plan to go to college. These standards far exceed the strictest high school graduation requirements of any State today, and they also exceed the admission standards of all but a handful of our most selective colleges and universities. (para. 3)

Although the call for standards in this statement was somewhat indirect, the report is suggesting that the college-preparatory curriculum offered in this statement should become the “standard.”

Standards: Subdividing and Defining

Nowhere in the *Nation at Risk* report are standards defined, illustrating that from the beginning of the emphasis on standards, the assumption of the inexperienced may have been that standards mean the same thing to everyone. But almost any teacher can attest to marked differences in what standards mean to different audiences: to administrators, to parents, and to students. When moved outside the confines of the most immediate stakeholders—parents, teachers, and students—standards often take on even more substantial changes in meaning. The way that standards are defined and discussed often reveals political motivations. Standards that promote a return to the “basics” and work to re-instantiate a uniform national culture are encouraged by “cultural restorationists,”² while standards that argue for inclusiveness and expanded definitions of subject areas are often encouraged by more progressive groups. Even though their agendas for standards may be strikingly different, groups with radically divergent understandings of standards use the same term without efforts to define differences.

Basic Definitions: The OED on Standards and More

A close look at definitions of the term “standards” reveals a complex and interesting history for the word and implications for contemporary educational uses of it. The *Oxford English Dictionary*’s five pages of definitions include these:

A flag, sculptured figure, or other conspicuous object, raised on a pole to indicate the rallying point of an army (or fleet);

The authorized exemplar of a unit of measure or weight;

An authoritative or recognized exemplar of correctness, perfection, or some definite degree of any quality;

A definite level of excellence . . . viewed as a prescribed object of endeavour or as the measure of what is adequate for some purpose;

A commodity, the value of which is treated as invariable, in order that it may serve as a measure of value for all other commodities.

These variant definitions all have a common ground in authority and powerful social institutions. In fact, the OED notes that “in early instances the standard of measure is always either expressly or by implication called ‘the king’s standard.’” All these definitions pointedly establish that dealing with standards means allegiance to authority, customs, and standardized measurements of value. Although a king may no longer be in charge of standards, standards are, nonetheless, the purview of those in positions of power. In the educational standards movement, the right to set educational standards most often resides in federal and state governmental entities. In fact, in the case of the NCTE/IRA Standards of the 1990s, the US Department of Education (acting under both executive and legislative mandates) was “king.” Standards are typically top-down, authoritative dictates that are imposed by governing bodies, often with little or no input from the stakeholders who are asked to enact and meet those standards.

General definitions of “standard” that illustrate reliance on authority, custom, and standardization provide a foundation for the various meanings the term takes on in educational use. Standards are deeply reliant on the power structures that produce them, so attention to those structures, the people who populate them, and the political and cultural agendas represented in those structures is vital.

At the outset of the standards movement, there was some awareness of differences in definitions and subdivisions of standards. Not surprisingly, differences in power structures, subject positions, and agendas led various players in the standards controversy to subdivide and define standards differently. Scholars commenting on the standards movement have not overlooked the confusion that results from a seemingly vast variety in standards definitions. In 1994, Robert Orrill observed that “the draft documents now emerging [from the various national subject-area standards projects then

being developed] vary significantly in format, terminology, and even understanding of the definition and purpose of standards.” This, he predicted, will cause “much confusion” as all concerned groups try to “comprehend the standards and relate them one to another” (p. 7). Christopher Cross (1994), a senior fellow at the Center for Education Policy, called the lack of a common standards vocabulary a “tangled and undecipherable web,” claiming that while some subject-area groups were writing performance standards, others were focusing on teaching and assessment standards. As Cross pointed out, the differences between these projects were substantial and would cloud both the education community’s and the general public’s acceptance of the projects (p. 45). Both Orrill and Cross were correct. The national standards projects, especially those in English Language Arts and American History, were not well-received—a reception based substantially on definitional differences.³ Even though there was some concern about definitional differences, this limited awareness rarely became a serious or extended topic of discussion. The prevailing assumption, a seriously faulty one, was that “standard” is a clearly understood, easily defined term.

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Charting the Definitions

A review of several sources providing definitions of education standards provides an illustration of the often complicated and confusing differences in these definitions. An online educational glossary published by Harcourt Educational Measurement defines standards generically as “arbitrary judgments of what students *should* be able to do, given a set of test items.” *Education Week*’s online site attempts to clarify the complications of the term “standards” with a general definition of standards as “subject-matter benchmarks to measure students’ academic achievement,” and immediately subdivides by defining curriculum standards as standards that “drive what students learn in the classroom” (2004, para. 1). In a “Topics” section of the *Education Week* website, Kathryn M. Doherty breaks the term into three sub-areas including academic standards, content standards, and performance standards.

Academic standards “describe what students should know and be able to do in the core academic subjects at each grade level”;

Content standards describe “basic agreement about the body of education knowledge that all students should know”;

Performance standards “describe what level of performance is good enough for students to be described as advanced, proficient, below basic, or by some other performance level” (2004, para. 3).

Education Week’s sub-division of standards is just the tip of the iceberg. In the 1996 *Standards for the English Language Arts* (published at the end of the NCTE/IRA standards project) standards are defined as “statements about what is valued in a given field . . . and/or descriptions of what is considered quality work” (p. 75). Additionally, the NCTE *Standards* publication subdivides standards into different types: content, assessment, and performance standards.

Content standards are “statements of what students should know and be able to do in a given discipline” (p. 71).

Assessment standards are “1. statements setting forth guidelines for evaluating student work . . . ; 2. measures of student performance” (p. 70).

Performance standards (related to part 2 of the previous definition) are “statements that attempt to specify the quality of student performance at various levels of competency in the subject matter set out in content standards” (p. 74).

In an example of how different political viewpoints can color conceptions and definitions of standards, works by Lil Brannon and Diane Ravitch provide helpful examples. Brannon (1995), a professor at University of North Carolina at Charlotte, objected to standards in general because she saw them as a way for the government to “manage and maintain” the literacy crisis, a crisis “fueled by the tensions between America’s basic promise to the individual and the needs of capitalism” (p. 441). Despite her general objections to the standards movement, Brannon detailed the conflict between types of standards that were being developed in the NCTE/IRA project in the early 1990s and what the Department of Education (DOE) wanted. In the NCTE/IRA project, she said, “generative standards” were being developed rather than the “prescriptive standards” favored by government officials. She noted the difference between these kinds of standards by giving examples of each: “A generative standard might be ‘students should write to a variety of audiences in a number of genres.’ A prescriptive standard would be ‘students should write a narrative essay to students in their classroom in the third

grade” (p. 442). Brannon acknowledged that the NCTE/IRA project insisted on including opportunity-to-learn (OTL) standards, which she defined as standards that “explain what governmental support would have to be included to accomplish the standards” (p. 442). This insistence and her anticipation that the federal government would object to OTL standards is one of the reasons she believed that the NCTE/IRA project was doomed. Although the NCTE/IRA standards were not exactly doomed, funding for the project was abruptly withdrawn after the first year, and the project was completed without government funding.

Diane Ravitch was one of the DOE officials critical of the NCTE/IRA standards project from the beginning. In her 1996 book, *National Standards in American Education: A Citizen’s Guide*, Ravitch, a former Department of Education Assistant Secretary, presented the conservative or “cultural restorationists’” take on standards. She claimed that standards are often “gladly” accepted and that they “improve the quality of life” alleging that “without them, life would be chaotic, unpredictable and dangerous” (p. 9). She admitted that the use of “standards” in education “means different things to different people” and criticized those who “think that they have standards”; however, in her opinion, all they have “are hortatory and obscure statements about aspirations that are inherently unmeasurable” (pp. 12-13). Realizing the difficulties of a generic version of standards, Ravitch divided them into three categories: content standards, performance standards, and opportunity-to-learn, or school OTL standards (p. 13).

Content standards describe “what teachers are supposed to teach and students expected to learn.”

Performance standards define “degrees of mastery or levels of attainment.”

Opportunity-to-learn (OTL) standards define “the availability of programs, staff, and other resources that schools, districts, and states provide so that students are able to meet challenging content and performance standards” (pp. 12-13).

Ravitch maintained that standards are interrelated, calling content standards without performance standards “meaningless” (p. 13).

While acknowledging that the change in terminology from “delivery standards” (which had a “bureaucratic ring”) to OTL standards (which sounds more “idealistic”) was a “brilliant public relations stroke” (p. 150), Ravitch argued OTL standards are undesirable and later devotes over three pages in a later chapter to a negative discussion of them. They may, she

argued, require an undesired uniformity in “class size, disciplinary policies, teaching methods, teacher training, and other matters that should be left to professional discretion” (p. 14) which could possibly start education “down the slippery slope” to federal control (p. 151). The irony here is too obvious to overlook, as Ravitch was one of the mainstays in a project mandating federal content and performance standards. In the conclusion of this section, she praised President Clinton for making sure that OTL standards were not *required* in the final version of the Goals 2000 legislation (p. 153).

Although OTL standards were not required by the Goals 2000 legislation, a definition of them, as well as Content and Performance Standards, is included in the “Definitions” (1994) section of the enacted legislation:

Content standards are “broad descriptions of the knowledge and skills students should acquire in a particular subject area” (section 4);

Opportunity-to-learn standards are “the criteria for, and the basis of, assessing the sufficiency or quality of the resources, practices, and conditions necessary at each level of the education system (schools, local educational agencies, and States) to provide all students with an opportunity to learn the material in voluntary national content standards or State content standards” (section 7);

Performance standards are “concrete examples and explicit definitions of what students have to know and be able to do to demonstrate that such students are proficient in the skills and knowledge framed by content standards.” (section 9)

Claims of those concerned with confusion in standards are valid. The misunderstandings that may result when definitions of standards are assumed rather than articulated can be seen by looking first at the generic term. The Harcourt definition characterizes standards as “arbitrary;” the *Education Week* definition qualifies standards as related to “subject-matter” and uses the measurement term “benchmarks;” and the NCTE/IRA definition emphasizes a concern for “what is valued” and “descriptions.” If some members of a standards development committee are guided by understanding similar to that in the Harcourt definition, then the standards they seek to develop could be based on just about anything. Other members might be working from a definition more like *Education Week*’s and assume that they are developing standards that must be attached to numeric assessment. And although “value” can be determined by numeric assessment, those working from the NCTE/IRA definition might be inclined to think they are develop-

ing standards that have to do with ideals or non-numeric assessments of worth.

Similar differences appear in definitions of specific kinds of standards, exemplified by the distinctions in definitions of content standards. The NCTE/IRA Standards publication defines content standards as “statements of what students should know and be able to do in a given discipline” (p. 71), while Ravitch defines them as standards that “describe what teachers are supposed to teach and students expected to learn” (*National Standards*, p. 12). Two different kinds of thinking about education are apparent in these standards. Ravitch’s definition depends on the banking or transmission model of learning in which teachers have stores of knowledge and deposit or send this knowledge to students who re-store it. The NCTE/IRA Standards emphasize knowing and doing, which is more illustrative of the active learning or participatory model of education in which students are dynamic participants in their education rather than passive receptacles. In addition to these basic definitional differences, the NCTE/IRA and Ravitch/DOE did not agree on performance standards. NCTE/IRA regularly avoided setting numerically-based assessment and performance standards, and included vignettes or stories about the implementation of standards instead. Ravitch and the DOE, however, insisted that content and performance standards are dependent and interrelated. Ravitch argued that content standards without quantitative performance standards are “meaningless” (p. 13).

Confusion abounds when the *Education Week* definition of Academic Standards is added to the mix. *Education Week*’s definition of Content Standards (as noted above) is quite different from the others included in this comparison, but their definition of Academic Standards is closer to what the others define as Content Standards.

Education Week, NCTE/IRA, and Ravitch all have similar definitions for performance standards, and NCTE/IRA’s assessment standards could quite easily be added to the Performance standards category. In the Goals 2000 legislation definitions, however, the definition of performance standards is quite different from the others. The language of this definition, which calls for “concrete examples” and “explicit definitions,” is much more specific than that of the other groups and out of synch with them. The NCTE/IRA and Goals 2000 definitions of performance standards make the links between assessment of student capabilities and content standards explicit. Finally, despite their differences in opinion on whether OTL standards are advisable, the definitions of delivery/OTL Standards offered by Brannon and Ravitch are remarkably alike.

Recent Evidence of Standards Definitions: Standards for Success

Unfortunately, the definitional confusion that was a hallmark of the 1990s standards movement has not abated. As I noted in the introduction, more recent evidence of the problems that ensue when standards are not defined are found in the 2003 *S4S* report—a report on the \$2.45 million project jointly undertaken by the American Association of Universities (AAU) and the Pew Charitable Trusts. According to the *S4S* web site, the report was sent to “each of the nearly 20,000 public high schools in the United States as well as to state education departments and organizations with interests in educational improvement” (“Materials,” 2003, para. 3). Despite the substantial sum spent on the project, it is seriously flawed. These flaws make its wide distribution a serious problem. Although the focus of the entire report is on standards, the term standards is never defined. Readers must assume that those who developed this project and authored its final draft buy into the broad assumption that the term standards has an easily understood, uncontested meaning. In fact, the developers of the *S4S* acknowledge some of the problems with standards definitions in their web-based discussion of the standards development process. There the authors acknowledge that a review of their data “revealed that higher education faculty and administrators do not think about standards in the same way that state content standards writers do. Faculty statements tended to be general, rather than specific” (“Process Standards,” para. 1).

In order to remedy this difference in thinking about standards, the project directors did not step back and define standards—most likely because this realization came late in the development process (a claim supported by the developers’ admission that awareness of it came as data was being reviewed). Reworking the *S4S* with standards definitions adequate to remedy this problem would have required redoing the entire project.

The strategic gyrations the project directors undertook to remedy their initial design flaw—a design that assumed that standards was a clear, uncontested term—involved using what the web site calls “converging strategies.” These strategies included analyzing syllabi from first-year university courses, conducting an “expert review” of standards from “national content organizations and leading states,” conducting a “pilot analysis,” convening a “content review” forum, and then using the draft of the *S4S* in a “second analysis of assessments from fourteen states” concluding with editing to “improve clarity and utility” (“Process: Standards,” sections 1-5).

Evidence of this design flaw (the failure to define standards) is apparent to anyone willing to delve into the “Process” section of the website, but

is not mentioned in any part of the published *S4S* report itself. The introduction is full of references to standards (the term is used at least 25 times) and even uses some of the subdivisions of standards detailed earlier in this document. Unfortunately, the term “standards” is bandied about in a manner that the careful reader could only call confusing (and a critical reader might be inclined to call irresponsible). In what appears to be an attempt at a definition, though not categorized as such, the second paragraph of the Introduction states that the *S4S* project was intended to “identify what students must do to succeed in entry-level courses at their institutions [the AAU member institutions]” (*Standards for Success*, 2003, p. 8). Immediately following that claim, the report refers to “national academic content standards,” which were used for comparison, but it is unclear to what these national standards were compared. Consultants in standards development “contributed suggestions” for improvement of the project, but apparently were not involved in the project design (p. 8).

At one point in the introduction, the *S4S* standards are called “road map[s]” designed to illustrate the “content knowledge and habits of mind that are valued by leading research universities in the United States” (p. 8).

In another reference, the *S4S* standards are called “knowledge and skills standards” and are characterized as “general statements of expectations” (p. 9). Further attempts to qualify this terminology are baffling, and in the first 10 pages of the report, the *Standards for Success* are called standards (just the plain vanilla type), road-map standards, content knowledge standards, knowledge and skill standards, and teaching and learning standards.

This report is flawed in many other ways as well, not the least of which are the standards set out for “Writing and Editing.” The *S4S* report is one of the recent documents that galvanized my belief that cavalier use of the term “standards” and projects based on such carelessness were particularly damaging to the area of English Language Arts. Criticisms of the *S4S* standards for writing could be another entire essay, but a review of its failings will suffice here. In the introductory material to the English standards, the initial sentence of the “Writing and Editing” section claims that “Grammar is the basis for good writing.” The third sentence declares that “students in college are expected to know how to diagram a sentence” (p. 18). Research in the past 30 years has thoroughly disqualified grammar as the “basis for good writing” and current best practice in the university classroom has no expectation that students will know how to diagram a sentence.⁴ The writing standards themselves begin with a list of ten skills that are all grammatical and mechanical in nature. Interestingly, even though the introduction

to this section heralds diagramming sentences as vital to university success, skill in sentence diagramming is not mentioned in the list. Abilities that most university writing teachers consider important to success (like prewriting, logical organization, transitions, style, and voice) are not even mentioned until much later (Part D) of the standards. Rhetorical elements that most informed writing teachers consider fundamental (like using writing to “communicate ideas, concepts, emotions, and descriptions to the reader”) are left until Part E. Adapting writing for specific audiences, one of the hallmarks of much college writing instruction, takes a lowly place as item E.5 (p. 25).

Although the AAU/PEW project was developed with “participation by more than 400 faculty and administrators in every academic discipline,” the Writing and Editing section does not reflect the thinking of many of the writing specialists who were in attendance at the 20 meetings on the project and whose names appear in the report. When the *S4S* was published, objections to the “Writing and Editing” section were discussed on the Council of Writing Program Administrators listserv (WPA-L). The discussions were instigated by Marty Townsend, Director of Campus Writing Programs at the University of Missouri, who was a participant at one of the AAU/Pew meetings. Despite the participation of many writing specialists, Townsend argues that “portions of the ‘Standards’ are blatantly out of touch with contemporary Composition Studies theory and practice.” In the same online discussion, Susan Jarratt, Campus Writing Coordinator at the University of California Irvine, described the Berkeley *S4S* meeting as “poorly attended” and remarked that she was the “only person in the group with a background in composition.” The discussion about writing standards at the Berkeley meeting was led by a graduate student in educational research who, Jarratt commented, had “good intentions but no particular knowledge about writing pedagogy or research.” Jarratt also reported that one person in her group was insistent about the importance of sentence combining. This, she argues, is not representative of the UC Irvine program or institution, yet this one unrelenting voice may have inspired the sentence diagramming portion of the Standards. The process, as Jarratt described it, was being “propelled through a set of questions and readings at a rapid clip—very broad-based, uncontextualized.” At the end of the session the responses were “wrapped into a bundle of conclusions that were presented as definitive.” Although her name is included in the Report as participating faculty, Jarratt concluded that she was “very put-off by the whole thing and would not put much store in the results.”

Richard E. Miller (2003), now Chair of the Department of English at

Rutgers, whose name is also listed as participating faculty in the Report, joined the list of objectors on the WPA-L listserv commenting that he attended the meeting at the request of his Dean and that he took along several people from the Writing Program. He described a breakfast talk by the leader of the project who then left immediately. The writing contingent met in a room where notes were written and discussion focused on “how unsatisfactory we found the prompt of coming up with standards in isolation of real programs, real students, real assignments.” Following the meeting, Miller recounted writing a “lengthy” letter to the *S4S* group in which he stated his “dissatisfaction with the process and my concern that the writing samples they provided . . . which consisted only of papers on literary topics.” He continued, “I found the exercise to be completely unrelated to my own sense of what students should be doing in 101 and unlike any kind of writing I have tried to solicit in 20 years in the classroom.” He never received a response to the letter. Miller concluded by saying “I did participate in this project, but I don’t endorse its findings or its recommendations and didn’t anticipate my participation being read as a sign of endorsement.” In a December 2004 correspondence, Miller commented that he was “haunted anew” by the *S4S* project. Recently, a member of university-wide committee on the undergraduate curriculum that Miller chairs was “excited” about the Writing section of the *S4S* report and Miller’s apparent support of it. Despite his letter and disavowal of the project, his name is still attached to the Report.

Reports by Townsend, Jarratt, and Miller serve to undermine the claims of the publication that “through progressive meetings and review of the data, a broad consensus was formed on what knowledge and skills were necessary to succeed in entry-level university courses.” If those running the meetings had been knowledgeable about standards and interested in gathering input from disciplinary experts to develop credible content standards instead of being focused on what Susan Jarratt clearly saw as the focus—“promoting the project itself” and “trying to convince us to go back to our home institutions and get them to fund more phases and visits”—then perhaps the standards for Writing and Editing might have been better. Unfortunately for those interested in composition studies, those in charge of the *S4S* were not interested in promoting anything but an out-dated approach to the teaching of writing and standards that supported that approach. Clearly, this widely distributed report may cause problems for both high school and university composition programs. Its unequivocal insistence on grammar as the basis of good writing will fuel the fires of those who believe that drill and practice in grammar, sentence diagramming, and outlining are the ways

to good writing—a belief that is not supported by research in writing and can be powerfully argued against by multitudes of good classroom teachers who actually ask students to write, not just complete workbook pages. This standards project is yet another in a long list of projects that have not served English Language Arts well.

The *S4S* report is the most recent of the many flawed standards projects that have been completed since the *Nation at Risk* report. These unsound projects are a result of sloppy or completely missing definitions of standards and an assumption that everyone, by default, knows what standards are. The same kind of unexamined thinking—thinking that assumes that everyone knows what writing is about—informs the writing standards that come of out these projects.

OTL Standards: A Casualty of Definitional Neglect

One of the most problematic results of the failure to define standards is the fading emphasis on OTL standards. In a 1999 “Focus on Basics” article from the Harvard Graduate School National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, Regie Stites defines OTL standards as standards that “specify the nature of educational inputs and resources that are needed to realize expectation for student and school performance” (para. 7) and claims that OTL standards have been “mostly neglected” (para. 10). Performance standards, he argues, drive the standards movement’s quest for accountability. A focus on performance standards alone puts the burden of proof on teacher and students almost exclusively. OTL standards, however, take into consideration the broader society’s responsibility to provide students and teachers with the resources they need to meet performance standards. Very few, if any, recent standards conversations or projects in the last decade mention OTL standards—even as a sidelight. OTL standards have disappeared from the standards debate, taking with them any sense that the public has accountability to students—accountability that should be equal in importance to students’ responsibility to meet performance standards. Diane Ravitch argued against OTL standards, but claimed that content standards without performance standards are “meaningless.” I would argue that both content and performance standards without OTL standards are meaningless and, more importantly, impossible to attain.

Demanding Higher Standards for Standards

At the beginning of this essay, I claimed that I would make a case that every conversation about standards should begin and end with definitions. I agree

with the “modest proposal,” suggested by Christopher Cross (1994) that a “ban” on the term “standards” be implemented “unless it is preceded by the proper modifier so that everyone can understand what kind of standards are being discussed” (p. 46). So that confusion and misunderstandings about standards can be at least partially alleviated, my initial suggestion is that every publication about standards must include standards definitions in the body as well as in a glossary.

Published definitions will help, but more needs to be done. Each time we talk with others about standards, we must insist on a definition of terms. Preservice English Language Arts teachers must be introduced to the general history of standards and field-specific standards. This history must take into account the political implications implicit in the teaching of English Language Arts and the highly-contested standards-setting projects in the field. Preservice teachers must also understand that standards provide the foundation of NCLB and other similar legislation. I am not suggesting a new course in standards, but that substantive reading and discussion of standards play a part in English Language Arts theory and methods courses.

The education standards movement would benefit from grounding in a process that emphasizes “standards development” rather than a definition of generic standards. Based on process rather than a static definition, standards development is a three-part process constituted by the establishment of 1) content standards, 2) OTL standards, and 3) performance standards. The order of this process is not accidental. Content and OTL standards must come before performance standards, since knowing the substance of what will be assessed as well as defining what will be needed for teachers and students to assess that substance is absolutely essential. The standards process can be conceived as a three-legged stool with content, OTL, and performance standards as the three legs. When any leg of a three-legged stool is longer or stronger or more heavily weighted than the others, the stool is out of balance and cannot function properly. If the standards development process is concerned only with assessment without considering content and OTL, the process is not functioning properly and will provide imbalanced results. Obviously, a similar imbalance occurs when any of the three standards types receive more emphasis than the others.

Standards development in the English Language Arts can legitimately and effectively begin with the standards definitions developed in the NCTE/

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IRA standards project. Although those definitions were presented earlier in this article, they bear repeating here:

Content standards are “statements of what students should know and be able to do in a given discipline” (p. 71).

Performance standards are “statements that attempt to specify the quality of student performance at various levels of competency in the subject matter set out in content standards” (p. 74).

Opportunity-to-learning standards are “statements of basic conditions necessary to achieve content or performance standards. These may include statements concerning learning environment, equity, and access to resources” (74).

I suggest the definitions above as starting points. The idea that standards definitions could be national, totalizing definitions that assume that “one size fits all” has a strong appeal and would go a long way to clearing up confusion. However, as in most other education efforts, standards definitions need to be based on broadly accepted ideas, but may be adapted and adopted to fit regional and institutional cultures. Bringing standards definitions into standards discussion at the outset should be required of every standards project. Thinking of standards as a multi-pronged process in which at least three types of standards are considered and defined will go a long way to better projects and better standards.

The education standards movement is built on the belief that better education will result from higher standards. To a large extent, however, the movement itself has not been held to high enough standards. As teachers in a discipline that works primarily with words and texts, English Language Arts teachers are well-suited to take on the challenge of demanding and developing better education standards. Because of our discipline’s centrality to the education enterprise, we are frequently invited into standards discussion. We need to take more advantage of our abilities and our position by demanding higher standards for standards.

Author’s Note

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Notes

1. Although details on this contentious project are available in bits and pieces in various NCTE (and other) publications, histories of the project are available in unpublished dissertations by Kimberley McCollum-Clark, 1995, and Patricia Freitag Ericsson, 2003; and from a 2004 article by Wixson, Dutro, and Athan.

2. In her unpublished dissertation, Kimberley McCollum-Clark refers to the group of people promoting a back-to-basics, standards-based version of educational excellence as the “cultural restorationists.” This group includes Diane Ravitch, Chester Finn, William Bennet, Lynn Cheney and several conservative organizations and foundations.

3. Both the English Language Arts and History Standards projects received scathing reviews from the conservative press and Republican officeholders. In more than one national newspaper, Dianne Ravitch complained that the NCTE/IRA standards were a “disaster” (“50 Ways,” 1996). Lynne Cheney, who held various governmental positions during the national standards movement, claimed that the History Standards presented a “warped view of history” (Jones, 1995, para. 2). Criticisms of these two standards projects were partly based in a struggle over content, but very few were calling these projects “content standard” projects. Many complaining about the subject-area standards argued that performance levels were not included in them. Both the NCTE/IRA and History Standards projects included OTL standards—a type of standards to which those complaining objected.

4. In an informal survey of professors in a variety of disciplines, my query as to whether they expected students in their classes to be able to diagram sentences was met with disbelief, puzzled faces, and often outright laughter. Not one person asked—in English or any other discipline—held this expectation.

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